

A  
L E T T E R

TO THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE  
WILLIAM PITT,  
FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, AND  
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER;

ON THE SUBJECTS OF  
T O L E R A T I O N  
AND  
CHURCH ESTABLISHMENTS;

Occasioned by his SPEECH against the Repeal of the TEST  
and CORPORATION ACTS, on WEDNESDAY  
the 28th of MARCH, 1787.

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The SECOND EDITION, Corrected and Enlarged.

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By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, L.L.D.F.R.S.

AC. IMP. PETROP. R. PARIS. HOLM. TAURIN. AUREL. MED. PARIS.  
HARLEM. CANTAB. AMERIC. ET PHILAD. SOCIUS.

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It is so far from being a crime, or an affront, to any legislature, to  
endeavour to shew the evil consequences, or inequitableness, of any  
law now in being, that all law-makers, who act upon principles of  
public justice and honour, cannot but esteem it an advantage to  
have such points laid before them. BP. HOADLEY.

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L O N D O N :

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MDCCLXXXVII.





A  
L E T T E R

TO THE

RIGHT HON. WILLIAM PITT.

S I R,

HAVING had the opportunity of hearing your speech against the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and thinking I could perceive that you had not given sufficient attention to the subject, or seen it in a true point of light, I take the liberty which I conceive not to be unbecoming an Englishman (and which, being well intended, and respecting an object of great national importance, is not, I presume, without some title to gratitude) to suggest what appear to me to be clearer ideas than you seemed to be possessed of, and such as may be the foundation of a better policy than you have adopted.

B

Educated

Educated as you have been by clergymen, who are interested in the support of the present establishment, and whose minds may therefore be supposed to be biaſſed in favour of it, it is not much to be wondered at, that you ſhould have adopted their idea of its inſeparable connection with the political conſtitution of this country, and that you ſhould have caught their fears on the ſubject. But that theſe notions, and others which you advanced in the courſe of the debate, are deſtitute of all foundation, I do not deſpair of being able to prove, even to your own ſatisfaction, and ſo as to influence your future conduct.

I ſhall previously obſerve, that beſides being miſled by your education and connections, there was the appearance of your being farther embarrassed, and miſled, by your ſituation; and that your attention to the real merits of the queſtion was diſtracted by a wiſh to recommend yourſelf to a majority of the people, without offending the minority; an object, Sir, which much older ſtateſmen than yourſelf  
have

*on the Subject of the TEST ACT.* 3

have seldom been able to accomplish. As far as I can perceive, you have failed with respect to both, and even Lord North, who spoke the honest sentiments of his heart, has left an impression of much greater respect on the minds of those against whom he pleaded, than you have done on those for whom you exerted yourself so much. But it has been the common deception of statesmen, to think to gain their ends by *address*, over-rating their own talents, and undervaluing those of others, who are as quick-sighted as themselves.

Believe an older man than you are, that a common proverb, older than our grandfathers, viz. *honesty is the best policy*, applies to the case of statesmen as fully as to that of tradesmen, for whose use it might be more particularly intended. Keep this in view in all measures of policy, invariably pursue what shall appear to be *right*, and you will be respected in all your conduct, and all the changes of your conduct, produced by a real conviction; because it



is not disgraceful to any man, and least of all to a young man, to change his opinion, on farther reflecting upon a subject. If any pretend to the extraordinary merit of deciding upon every thing intuitively, and without taking the pains that other men must do in order to understand it, he affects to be more than man; and those who see him to be in other respects like themselves, will not give him credit for his pretensions. But they will forgive a *mistake*, because they know that they are subject to mistakes themselves.

In this letter, in which I mean to take a pretty large scope, and bring before your view objects, to which, if I may judge by the tenor of your speech, you have not given much attention, I require no other apology for the liberty I take, than what is given me by the *postulatum*, that the greatest politicians are but *men*; and that notwithstanding their profound knowledge of the things to which they have given attention, they may be profoundly ignorant

rant of things to which they have not attended. And there are many things, and those in which great national interests are involved, which, educated as you have been, and circumstanced as you are, I apprehend you have not sufficiently studied. Among these, I must take the liberty to rank that of the intimate connection of any particular mode of religion with the welfare of the state, by a regard to which alone, and by no means to religion, in itself considered, your conduct, as a *statesman*, ought to be governed. As an individual, give as much attention to religion, and a future life, as you please. Nothing can be more interesting to any man. But as the ostensible prime minister of this country, you have nothing to do with any life besides *the present*, and the happiness of the inhabitants of this island in it. *This* is a province large enough for yourself, and all your colleagues in office. For other things we shall look to other persons, or provide for ourselves as well as we can.

When you say that the present establishment of the church of England is necessary to the civil establishment of the country, and that *this* is necessary to the peace and happiness of it, you may be misled by several fallacies, and the propositions you advance may be true or false, according as they are understood.

A change, and especially a great and sudden change in matters of religion would, no doubt, be dangerous, on the supposition that the people continued to think as they now do; because, in that case, they would certainly be dissatisfied, they would probably resist the innovation, and public calamity might ensue. But, Sir, this would not be the consequence of any change, how great soever, in matters civil or religious, which the people themselves should be persuaded to think well of. Nay, in this case, the same mischiefs which you now apprehend from a change, might arise from any attempts to prevent the change,

This



This island was, I presume, the seat of much happiness and temporal prosperity before either of the parts of our present boasted constitution had any existence. Our present form of government was not coeval with the nation; for our Saxon ancestors were heathens, and in a later period they were Catholics. As those, therefore, who approve of the present state of things must believe that past changes have been advantageous to us (and such changes as Englishmen in former times would certainly have opposed) why may not other changes be also advantageous, though, at the first proposal, the minds of the present generation may equally revolt at them? If the maxims on which you laid so much stress had always been rigorously adhered to, the established religion of this country would now have been Pagan, and our priests Druids. If, after this, they had been adopted at any period before the reformation, we must have been Catholics, and without a shadow of a toleration.

You disclaimed *persecution* in words, but you admitted, as Mr. Fox justly observed, the whole extent of its *principle*; and your dread of infringing on the established religion was such, as would have led you to maintain the grossest abuses that had once found their way into it. For whatever they have been, the bishops, by whose judgment you professed to be guided, have never voluntarily given them up. But are there any men now authorized to say, that *wisdom shall die with them*; and is it for you, Sir, to say to reformation, *Hitherto shalt thou go, and no farther*?

Surely, then, Sir, there can be no danger in any alteration which the people can be brought to approve of; and any present attempts to infuse into them a dread of innovation, is of the same nature with all attempts in the preceding periods of our history to keep the people blind to their future interests, for the sake of the present interest of certain individuals.

I do

I do not say, however, that nothing should be done by the governors of a nation but what the body of it shall have previously considered and approved, though in matters of great consequence the maxim ought to be adhered to; because many lesser changes may be made by way of *experiment*, or the better to excite attention and discussion; and things may easily revert to their former situation, if, after sufficient experience, the alterations should not be approved. The minds of the higher ranks in any community may well be presumed to be more enlightened than those of the lower. It is therefore their proper business to speculate, to devise plans for the public good, and to make trial of such as promise the best.

Now, Sir, if any change would be justifiable on these maxims, in the present state of things in this country, it would certainly be that which was proposed to the consideration of the House of Commons on the 28th Instant, and which you opposed on the principle of its being



too *hazardous*. If the *safety of the state* depended upon there being no justices of peace among the more opulent Dissenters, and no excisemen, &c. among those of the lower ranks, and on all the members of corporations being true churchmen, I would agree with you that no such characters ought to be admitted into such stations. But, Sir, is not the apprehension of *danger to the state* from such a change as this perfectly chimerical and ridiculous? Can you say that any danger, or shadow of danger, has arisen from Dissenters being admitted into any other offices of trust or power, as from their being members of the lower House of Parliament, into which they are eligible by the people? If the danger arise from the King being permitted to make Dissenters justices of peace or excisemen, would not the same, or greater danger, have arisen from the power which the crown unquestionably has of making Dissenters *peers*, which when once made can never be unmade? Indeed, Sir, there is no more danger of the constitution suffering from this quarter, than of the  
river

river Thames rising so high as to overflow the whole city of London ; and you might just as well propose the immediate raising of banks high enough to prevent so great a mischief.

What has been the conduct of those Dissenters who *can* comply with the present requisitions, so as actually to get into those offices from which you think it so necessary to exclude them, for many do this ? And though I disapprove of the practice, I am far from thinking that Dissenters, truly conscientious in other respects, may not think it right. Do they behave worse, as justices of peace, mayors, aldermen, excisemen, &c. than members of the church of England in the same offices ; or do Dissenters in parliament propose or second worse measures, measures more inimical to the peace and best interests of the country, than other members ? You, Sir, strongly declared the contrary, when you allowed the Dissenters the greatest merit as good citizens. Why then should not the proposed trial be made ? For

every regulation of this kind can be nothing more than a trial, or experiment.

If any danger should arise from it, it could not be so sudden, but that there might be time enough to prevent the mischief from being fatal to us. The consequence would not be the instantly filling of all the executive offices of government with Dissenters. And if one in an hundred was so filled, it would be far less than the number of Scotchmen who have promotion in this country; and yet nobody apprehends that, in consequence of this, any thing will be done hostile to England, or more favourable to the interests of Scotland. Why then excite the laughter, or indignation, of men of sense, by telling us of the alarms of the bishops, and holding out to our view the horrors of 1780. Are the members of your excellent church so silly as to be determined on burning the city of London, and cutting off all the resources of government, by destroying the bank, if you should grant this small  
boon



boon to their dissenting brethren ; as Lord North seemed to dread ?

Bishops are recorded in all histories, as the most jealous, the most timorous, and of course the most vindictive of all men, apprehensive of danger from quarters from which no eye but their own could have suspected any. They have always dreaded and opposed, as Mr. Fox observed, every change that, by any mode of construction, could be thought to have the least aspect towards themselves. The reformation was not made, or promoted by them ; and after it was made by the civil power, they voted against the repeal of the act which gave them the power of burning heretics\*.

\* By the Statute 29 Car. II. c. 9. intituled, “ *An Act for taking away the writ De Hæretico Comburendo,*” it is enacted, “ That the writ commonly called *Breve de Hæretico Comburendo*, with all process and proceedings thereupon, in order to the executing such writ, or following or depending thereupon, and all punishment by death, in pursuance of any ecclesiastical censures, be utterly taken away and abolished.” To the proposal of a law so reasonable and necessary as this, it might have been expected that no opposition would be made by any  
men

In all this I mean the general body of the bishops. There are individuals now among them, who would promote a farther reformation with as much zeal as Cranmer did in the reign of Henry VIII. If, Sir, you must be guided by a bishop, it is to be lamented that you did not make a better choice.

Indeed, Sir, it would have become you, as an enlightened statesman, instead of confessing that you were influenced by the chimerical apprehensions of this unwarlike body of men, and had caught their fears, to have endeavoured to give them some of your courage; and to have persuaded them that the thing which, to their disturbed

men calling themselves Christians and Protestants; but it appears by the Journals of the House of Lords, that all the Bishops voted against passing the bill into a law. In the year 1773, the Duke of Richmond moved in the House of Lords, that the proceedings of that House in relation to the above-mentioned law might be read; and they were accordingly read. I presume that the conduct of those Bishops excited the astonishment, if not the indignation, of all persons present at the reading of the Journals.

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imagination appeared to be a mountain, was, in reality, nothing more than a molehill.

You were repeatedly urged with the more complete toleration in Ireland, where the Dissenters are numerous, and where, notwithstanding this, the Test Act has been repealed, without any injury to the established church, and without any burning of the city of Dublin; so that the experiment has actually been made. But to this you made no reply whatever. And a very insufficient one was made to what was so forcibly urged on the subject of the greater liberality of several foreign states, as Russia, Prussia, and Holland; in all which no danger has ever been apprehended from employing troops of all religions. It was alleged that *arbitrary* monarchs might safely be permitted to do what *limited* ones could not. But have not the king and the two houses of parliament as much power in this country, as any prince in the world has in any other; and if there should be any apprehension



hension of danger to the state, or to the establishment, from the king's appointment of officers, civil or military, would there not be time enough (as the parliament meets every year) to prevent the mischief? But if no other nation has been injured by employing in its service persons of different religions, by whomsoever they were appointed, why should *we* apprehend any? Must all other nations have the magnanimity to adopt liberal plans of policy; and is England alone to be kept back in the glorious contest, by a regard to the idle fears of bishops, and those of a prime minister governed by bishops?

You alluded to some Dissenters as of a more dangerous complexion than others, in consequence of their being enemies to all ecclesiastical establishments; and, in order, I suppose, to pay a compliment to the rest, you said it was against *these* only that it was so necessary to be upon your guard. I avow myself to be of this class of Dissenters, and I glory in it. I have even no doubt, but that, as Christianity  
was

was promulgated, and prevailed in the world, without any aid from civil power, it will, when it shall have recovered its pristine purity, and its pristine vigour, entirely disengage itself from such an unnatural *alliance* as it is at present fettered with, and that our posterity will even look back with astonishment at the infatuation of their ancestors, in imagining that things so wholly different from each other as *Christianity*, and *civil power*, had any natural connection. Let the corruptions of Christianity, such as in this country, and on the continent of Europe, pass for it, avail themselves of such aid. The Christianity that I profess does not require, but disdains it. It wants no support that you, Sir, as a statesman, can give it, and it will prevail in spite of any obstruction that you can throw in its way.

If these principles render those Dissenters among whom I class myself unfit to be trusted in any office of power, take proper measures to prevent us; but make a discrimination, and do not confound our case

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with

with that of those Dissenters who think that there ought to be an establishment of Christianity in every country. But do you think that the sovereign, aided by the advice of his ministers, is ever likely to make choice of such persons as myself to fill any important executive office of the state, if there should be any apprehension of our *acting* upon these principles, to the hazard of the establishment? If there be no real danger from them, I must maintain that a mere *opinion* on the subject is no reasonable disqualification. Whatever mischief any person may intend to do me, I never think of using any precaution against him, if I know that it is not in his power to execute his intention. But why should you imagine that a Dissenter, who wishes for no civil establishment of religion, should be more hostile to the church of England, than one who would not only pull down that, but erect another in its place? I should think that the latter, being perhaps personally interested in it, would be animated with double zeal for its demolition.

Equally



Equally chimerical, Sir, are your apprehensions of danger to the *Articles of the Union* between England and Scotland, from any alterations in the ecclesiastical constitution of this country, which the members of it should be disposed to make. If, however, it be a thing of so very sacred and inviolable a nature, as that, for fear of any infringement of it, no alteration which the most enlightened among us may devise, can ever take place, we ought to rejoice that it was not made before the reign of Henry the eighth; for then it would have prevented the *Reformation*. However, as this union did take place before the last improvements of the *Toleration*, and it was not dissolved in consequence of them, I cannot think it to be of so very delicate a nature as is pretended; but that having borne so much, there can be no great risk in trying whether it may not bear a little more. There are objects, however, in which the welfare and glory of this country might be concerned, to which, I am confident, you would yourself not hesitate to sacrifice this favourite *Union*, or any thing

else that might interfere with them. Circumstances *may* arise in which it may be prudent for England to detach itself from Scotland, or for Scotland to detach itself from England. Let every greater good be pursued, and every lesser inconvenience be flighted; but above all let *justice* be done.

It has been said that, if the Dissenters gain this point, they will aim at something more. This I acknowledge. We should ask many things more, because there are many things more that we conceive ourselves to be entitled to, and which it will be no injury, but an advantage, to our country to grant us. We are a part of the community which, in return for great merit, have received great injuries. Part of them, no doubt, are removed; but it does not follow that the remainder are no burden. We feel them to be so, and shall take every fair opportunity of endeavouring to relieve ourselves. Let the bench of bishops be fully apprized of this, and take their measures accordingly. We have the frankness and magnanimity of which they are destitute, and shall not endeavour

deavour to take them by surprize. I shall therefore beg leave to tell you, Sir, and *them* through you, what it is that we do want, and what we shall certainly claim some time or other; and I shall afterwards speak to other things, which I conceive would be for the honour and advantage of this country, and which we, or our more enlightened posterity, will probably be aiming at, after all our claims as *Dissenters* are granted.

But to quiet their apprehensions from the dangerous attempts of such furious sectaries as myself and my friends, and the terror which they have conceived from our gunpowder plots, &c. I shall inform them that the means we propose to employ are not *force*, but *persuasion*. The *gunpowder* which we are so assiduously laying *grain by grain under the old building of error and superstition* \*, in the highest regions of

\* This is part of a sentence in a pamphlet of mine on *the importance and extent of free enquiry*, which Sir William Dolben did me the honour to quote at large, and descant upon, in his speech in the House.



which they inhabit, is not composed of saltpetre, charcoal, and sulphur, but consists of *arguments*; and if we lay mines with such materials as these, let them countermine us in the same way, or in any other way they please, and more congenial to their natures. What we are aiming at is to enlighten the minds of the people, and to show them that in the church-establishment of this country there is much of error and superstition; and if we can convince them that it is so (and of this I have no doubt) in proper time they will take it down of themselves, and either erect something better in its place, or dispose of the materials (if they should think them of any value) for some other purpose; and who will then be aggrieved or complain? After this there may be no *bishops*, as the term is now understood, but there may be christian ministers, and the people may be as well instructed in their duty; they may live as happily here, and make as good provision for their happiness hereafter.

I was

I was particularly happy in hearing from Lord North, who approved himself to be a sincere friend to the present establishment, that a *complete toleration* was proper, and that if any thing remained to make ours so, it ought to be brought forward. This was a sentiment which I heard from several quarters of the house, and from yourself. I therefore think myself encouraged, and *required*, to mention some things which are certainly wanting to a complete toleration in this country, and which do not at all affect the established church. There are complaints which, if redressed, would give Dissenters no civil power, but would only make them secure in the public profession and exercise of their religion. If, then, you were sincere in your declarations, redress these grievances, and do it generously, without any farther solicitation on our part. If the bishops have any magnanimity, let the motion come from themselves.

If you would make the toleration *complete*, you must give us a power of doing  
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that by *law*, which we now do by *connivance*, that is, the power of declaring and defending our religious principles. This power the laws of this country do not now give us. Many of us hold our property, and even our liberty, by the mere good will of our neighbours, and the generous spirit of the times, when the law would deprive us of both. As Christians, we think it our duty to hazard every thing, rather than neglect to take any measures in our power to propagate important truth; but we should certainly prefer a situation in which we might do this without being obliged to any person.

To place us in this situation, you must, in the first place, repeal the act of King William, which makes it *blasphemy* to impugn the doctrine of the Trinity. I think it my duty to attempt the utter overthrow of this doctrine, which I conceive to be a fundamental corruption of the religion which I profess, the greatest of those that mark the church of Rome, and which was left untouched at the re-

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formation.



formation. My reasons for this may be seen at large in my writings on the subject, and especially in my *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*. But whether the doctrine be true or false, give us the power of a free and fearless discussion of it. This, as friends to *toleration* simply, you and the bishops ought to do, as it cannot be pretended to be any infringement of the established religion of the country.

Repeal then this statute of King William, and all other penal laws in matters of religion, as a measure evidently necessary to render the toleration complete. If you will not do this without solicitation, though you acknowledge the propriety of it, you cannot complain if we should solicit. This is what I should have applied for in the first place, being, as it were, one of the *necessaries* of life, whereas the business of civil offices is a mere *superfluity*. Men may live, and live comfortably, without being justices of peace, or excisemen; but the confiscation of goods, and imprisonment for life, which  
would

would be my fate if the laws now existing were executed, every man will say would be a serious hardship, and in my opinion more severe than any mode of present death.

You consider the celebration of marriage as belonging to *religion*, as appears by your confining it to the clergy of the church of England, though with the exception of granting it to the Quakers. If this was wanting to *their* complete toleration, it must be also wanting to *ours*. Allow us, then, to be married by our own ministers. It is true we do not say with the Quakers, that we cannot in conscience comply with your forms, but we extremely dislike them; and if we were not taken, as it were, at an advantage, when we are disposed to make light of small obstacles, we should certainly make loud remonstrances on the subject. The service itself is a very awkward and indelicate one; and though it does not enforce upon the parties the obnoxious doctrine of the Trinity, it obliges us to attend a religious  
service

service into which that doctrine enters. Independently, however, of this consideration, it is certainly a very unreasonable thing, that the fees for marriage should all be given to the ministers of the church of England, and that those of the Dissenters themselves should not go to their own ministers.

You will certainly have an application to Parliament on this subject some time or other. The equity of the request you will hardly deny. If, therefore, you wish, as you pretend to do, that the toleration of this country should be *complete*, make this concession to us, without our asking for it; and let it not be said, as hitherto it may, that you have never had the generosity to do what is *right*, till you were in a manner compelled to it, and did it to avoid a greater evil \*."

I have now, Sir, done with the case of the *Dissenters*, as such, but I do not mean to stop here. Several things which oc-

\* In Ireland the Dissenters are not obliged to be married by the clergy of the church of England.



curred in the course of the debate that gave occasion to this letter, relate to the *establishment* itself; and I am irresistibly led to pursue my subject.

The establishment, you said, is necessarily connected with the civil constitution of the state, and makes a part of it. But in what sense is this proposition true? Can there be no change made in the establishment without a proportional injury to the state? Is it already so perfect in itself, and so completely adapted to our particular form of civil government, as that neither the wisdom of God nor of man, can devise any thing better for us? If not, it may be possible, that, as changes have been made for the better (such changes as have brought us into this incomparably excellent situation) other changes, as I have observed before, may be made with equal advantage.

One advantageous change, I presume, would be to confine the establishment to *Christianity itself*, and not to include in it  
what

what does not necessarily belong to it, but may be a great corruption and abuse of it; which, I am satisfied, is the case with respect to many things comprehended in the establishment of this country. In short, you ought to make such alterations, as not to exclude from the benefits of it any serious professor of Christianity. This, you said, would introduce universal confusion, every parish being divided within itself, in consequence of some persons believing one thing, and others another. But is not this the case at present? Do all the ministers of the church of England, notwithstanding their subscription of the same thirty-nine articles, purposely framed in order to prevent diversity of opinion, think alike? Nay, is it not notorious that they even preach, and publish, as different opinions as the Dissenters themselves?

I would also ask, where is the great inconvenience attending this circumstance? Cannot persons live peaceably together though they should differ on the subject of *religion*, as much as they do with respect to

to *politics*, or *philosophy*? They do not quarrel with one another because they employ different physicians. Why then should they quarrel because they chuse to attend different preachers? But allowing this to be an inconvenience, it must grow less and less continually, and would sooner vanish, if that liberty was given to all by law, which some of the clergy will venture to take by connivance. The consequence of free discussion would, in time, produce a rational and permanent uniformity. For truth, we need not doubt, will finally prevail in every contest, and no person ought to be under any bias in favour of any particular opinion, in consequence of its being favoured by the state; which, if it be an error, must greatly protract the prevalence of it. And certainly, Sir, no persons should be under any temptation to wound their consciences, by attempts to reconcile their belief of one doctrine with their subscription to another. This is an evil now existing, of great and growing magnitude, unspeakably greater than any thing that can be imagined to result from  
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the abolition of such subscriptions. This makes men of integrity in some things notoriously insincere in others, and the preachers of truth and virtue to the nation not seldom enter upon their profession with the solemn avowal of a falshood. *Offences will come, but woe to those by whom they come.*

If, Sir, you suppose that all the clergy of the church of England really believe what they have subscribed, or ever did believe it, as that there are three persons in one Godhead, that Jesus Christ is a proper object of prayer, and that he is to be adjured by his *bloody sweat and passion*, and by his holy *nativity and circumcision* (clear tokens of divinity no doubt) if you suppose that they believe that all mankind sinned in Adam, and are punished for his sin; and that all being, on this account, destined to everlasting destruction, God made choice of some of them to be saved, while he left others under an irreverfible sentence of damnation, with many other doctrines equally abhorrent to reason, and contradicted by the whole tenor of scripture,

ture, you are greatly mistaken. You, Sir, having been educated in one of our universities, have, no doubt, subscribed these doctrines yourself, but perhaps without ever knowing that you did so, and certainly before you had considered them, and consequently before you could have had any reason for believing them. Why then should the obligation to this subscription be continued?

If you wish to see a defence of the principal of the doctrines above-mentioned, and what the ingenuity of man can find to say in defence of the establishment by which they are supported, I would refer you to the sermons of the present learned bishop of Worcester. This only, to a person of your good sense, would, I should think, be quite sufficient for the purpose; without referring you to what I have said in reply to his lordship's arguments, in the conclusion of my *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, of which his lordship has not thought proper to take any notice.

Would

Would you imagine that this learned divine had attempted to prove the doctrine of *atonement* from our Saviour's washing his disciples feet ; and that he is seriously persuaded, that the reformation of errors and abuses, which had been accumulating during a period of fourteen hundred years, need not be carried any farther in this country, because it was not fixed till fifty years after it had begun in Germany ? But if you will look into his discourses, you will find that in this I advance no calumny. Weak as the ground of argument is, it is actually that of his lordship.

If, Sir, you listen to the apprehensions of churchmen, you must support every system that is once established, be it ever so absurd. The heads of these establishments, and all those who are supported by them, never have promoted any reformation, and it may therefore be presumed never will do it. For human nature being the same, in all ages, men will always do the same things in the same circumstances.

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But if you listen to reason and common sense, you will never apprehend any real inconvenience in exchanging *error* for *truth*, or absurd practices for rational ones ; and especially the worship of a mysterious unintelligible *trinity in unity* (which, if you will look into the controversy now carrying on by its ablest advocates, in your church, and out of it, you will see that no man can either explain, or defend) for the sole worship of the *one living and true God, the maker of heaven and earth, and the God and father of Jesus Christ*, as well as our own God and father.

If you must have a *state religion* (for which I own I see no occasion whatever) let it be at least something rational and intelligible ; something that mankind may see to afford a natural foundation of good conduct here, and of reasonable expectations hereafter ; and such is the *Unitarian doctrine*, as opposed to your Trinitarian worship, in the book of Common Prayer. Indeed, Sir, they must either be very ingenious who can lead you to entertain any  
dread

dread of such a religion as I have described, or you must be very weak to be influenced by their arguments. By all means, therefore, favour, and do not discourage, that gradual spread of truth, which will, in the end, without any convulsion in the state, without any diminution of its strength at home, or respectability abroad, effect this great revolution.

Affure yourself, Sir, that the Unitarian doctrine has already taken deep root in the church itself; and it is a plant of a strong constitution, and makes vigorous shoots. The present controversy greatly quickens its growth; and in spite of all the efforts of churchmen, and of all that, as a statesman, you can do to assist them, the doctrines which constitute the peculiar faith of the church of England must fall before it. And if the hierarchy will obstinately retain these doctrines, and keep up the subscription to them, it must, in time, fall with them. Your present friends, to whom, in the late debate, you sacrificed so much, clearly see, and dread

this progress of things ; and whether they publish, as the archdeacon of St. Alban's, and the dean of Canterbury, preach, as the bishop of Lincoln \*, or be silent, as the bishop of Worcester, it is not in their power to stop it.

Another circumstance relating to the establishment of this country calls loudly for redress. It is utterly incapable of defence, and yet will probably be retained as long as possible, in consequence of its being necessary to keep *things as they are*. I mean the subscription to the thirty-nine articles of the church of England, at the time of matriculation in Oxford, and on taking the degree of Master of Arts at Cambridge ; and in the latter, every person who takes a Bachelor's degree is obliged to declare that he is *bona fide* a member of the church of England. This is an ab-

\* In this I refer to a Sermon which his Lordship preached before the Mayor and Corporation of Norwich, in which I have been informed I had the honour to be mentioned together with Mr. Fox and Margaret Nicholson, and which I hope his Lordship will do us the justice to publish.



furdity peculiar to this country. In all others the universities are open to all the world, while yours are shut to all except yourselves. As if it were from a dread of free enquiry, you take care to fetter the mind at the very time when you ought most of all to favour its expansion, and to remove every obstruction to the attainment of truth.

By thus shutting the door of the universities against all sectaries, and keeping the means of learning to yourselves, you may think to keep us in ignorance, and therefore less able to give you disturbance. But though ignominiously, and unjustly, excluded from the seats of learning (which, as maintained by the public funds, ought to be open to all the community) and driven to the expedient of providing, at a great expence, for scientific education among ourselves, we have had this advantage, that our institutions, being formed in a more enlightened age, are more liberal, and therefore better calculated to answer the purpose of a truly liberal education.

Thus while your universities resemble pools of *stagnant water* secured by dams and mounds, and offensive to the neighbourhood, ours are like *rivers*, which, taking their natural course, fertilize a whole country. Our plans of education embrace a much greater variety of objects; and the minds of our youth, being unfettered by subscription, are certainly more open to the impression of truth.

If you, Sir, have the discernment and courage becoming a great statesman in this country, do you yourself, as a representative of one of the universities, propose the removal of this great evil; abolish subscription at the time of matriculation, and in every other period in the course of education, lay open the advantages of Oxford and Cambridge to us Dissenters, equally with other members of the same community; and if you still think it necessary that your own clergy should believe such doctrines as those above-mentioned, let the subscription be confined to *them*, and let it be made at the time of their leaving the University,  
or

or their entering upon any church preferment. They will then subscribe with their eyes open, a greater proportion of the clergy will most probably really believe the system they teach ; and, though ignorant and mistaken, yet, being *honest*, they will, with more advantage, recommend honesty and integrity to others.

As things are at present, a considerable number of the most serious and intelligent youths, who are destined for the church, find themselves unable to enter it ; while no objection is made to those who would as readily subscribe the decrees of the Council of Trent, or the Koran, as the Articles of the Church of England.

Most of the evils I have now mentioned, call so loudly for redress, that you may assure yourself they will be redressed, and probably, as you are a young man, in your own time, tho' you may not have the honour of procuring it yourself. It is a great work, that absolutely requires to be done, and Divine Providence, which we



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fee is gradually reforming abuses, and bringing good out of all evil, will be at no loss in finding proper instruments for the purpose.

There are also many other things relating to your church establishment, that ought to be attended to, such as giving some of your clergy seats in the House of Lords, by which you debase their proper character, and divert them from their proper pursuits; the enormous disproportion in the provision you make for the clergy, that most inexpedient method of doing it by *tythes* and the Ecclesiastical Courts. These, Sir, are abuses which will find their remedy in due time, but, perhaps, in the good sense of a future generation.

The obligation imposed on the Dissenters to contribute to the maintenance of the public establishment, which you think to be essential to its support, I think to be equally tyrannical, unnecessary, and disgraceful to it. If it be such as really to recommend itself to a great majority of  
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the people, surely that great majority will be able to support it, without the help of those who have a religion of their own to provide for. This circumstance is one, among many others, which manifestly shows a distrust of its proper basis, on *reason and truth*.

Whether you will call it a proper *establishment*, or not, it is certainly the most equitable thing in any country, and the best method of getting a true and useful religion, to leave every person at liberty to think and chuse for himself, and to support that which he prefers. There being then no undue bias on the mind, that form of religion will at length establish itself, and become universal, which shall be found by experience to be most deserving of it; and the state will thereby be relieved from a great part of its present care and incumbrance. This has always been the case in a great part of North America; and the history of it will not give you any alarming apprehensions of the consequences of adopting the  
same

same in this country. Persons professing every mode of religion live happily together in Philadelphia, and why might they not do the same in London? Only remove every motive of *interest*, arising from the emoluments of an establishment, and be assured you will leave nothing for which men will find themselves much disposed to fight.

If we now look to Ireland, you will see, Sir, the most manifest of all abuses, I will venture to say, that ever accompanied any establishment whatever; a thing unknown in England, or any other country in the world. In all other places it is the religion of the *majority*, and that of a very great majority of the inhabitants, that is supported by the state, to which the minority are compelled to contribute; and the principal argument universally alledged for them, and to which you had recourse, is, that it *is* the religion of the majority. But in Ireland the religion established by law is that of a small minority, that, I believe, of not more than *one person in ten*  
of

of all the inhabitants of the country; so that to support the religion of this *tenth man*, the *nine* are compelled to pay their full tythes. I have been informed that there are even whole parishes, in which the established clergy do no duty at all. It has, moreover, been said, tho' I hope without truth, that in parishes where there have been but few Protestant families, the clergy have contrived to remove them, that they might enjoy their revenues, without being obliged to any clerical duty.

It may be said that when this system was adopted, there was some hope of bringing over the inhabitants to the religion that was thus imposed upon them; but this pretence must have ceased long ago. With every means in their power, some just, and others shockingly unjust (at which the feelings of human nature must revolt, as much as at any circumstance attending a popish inquisition) the clergy of the established church in Ireland have never been able to convert any considerable



able number of Catholics in the southern, or of Presbyterians in the northern parts of the island. If, Sir, you have any regard to common justice, and the most obvious maxims of it, exert yourself to remedy this crying abuse; and be assured that you will not be able to find out any other remedy, that shall be effectual to quell the present disturbances in that country.

If this conduct was proper with respect to Ireland, why was not the same thing attempted in Scotland; and why is it not carried into execution in Canada, Nova Scotia, or wherever you have *power* to enforce it? As to *justice*, or *mercy*, it is evident that they were not considered in the case.

But, Sir, I look with satisfaction to a future and a better state of things, in which the *religion of Christ* will be as much detached from all connection with *civil power* as it was in its best days, before the time of Constantine; since which time it has  
always

always been kept in chains, and made subservient to the most unworthy purposes. It will then be supported not by the compulsory payment of tythes, or any compulsion at all, but by the voluntary attachment of its friends, who will understand and value it.

With respect to the bishoprics, deaneries, prebends, and other appendages of the hierarchy, which you represented as essential to the good estate of the kingdom, I shall tell you a true story, and leave the application to yourself. A farm in this country was famous for producing cheese of the finest flavour; but the meadows had, for ages, been full of ant-hills. These the proprietor wished to have removed, but the farmer remonstrated, maintaining that the peculiar excellence of his cheese depended upon them; and he said that he must quit his farm if they were disturbed. The proprietor, however, persisted in his purpose, and in consequence of this the tenant did leave the farm, and another came in his place; and

he found the cheese more in quantity, than it had produced before, and equal in quality.

Much, Sir, very much, is to be done in this country; and in due time there will not be wanting men who will have the head, the heart, and the firmness of nerve to do it.

I would not, however, be understood to be an advocate for any *violent* changes. Any thing of this kind would counteract and defeat all my purposes. Every desirable step in the whole progress will be effected by the operation of *reason* alone, aided by *free enquiry*; and on no consideration would I have any thing done by the governing powers, but with the hearty concurrence, and at the requisition, of the people. All I ask of you, as one of our governors, is to lay no undue bias on the minds of men. Put them into a situation to judge freely, and have that confidence in *truth*, as to believe that it will be able to recommend and enforce itself. This is  
my



my only ground of confidence with respect to every thing for which I contend; but this has not been the case with the advocates of the church of England.

Such, Sir, is the state, and such the maxims, of that ecclesiastical establishment, which, as you have been taught, is so intimately connected with the civil constitution of this country; and to preserve which you have thought your Test and Corporation Acts to be so absolutely necessary. But on the same principles, and from the same apprehensions of remote *danger to the state*, which make these provisions necessary, you ought to provide other securities. One of your friends in the House proposed that the Dissenters should be excluded from the House of Commons; and considering the ideas that some persons have of the dangerous and insinuating nature of our principles, and the alarm which the bishops have taken at them (and which may be expected to increase rather than diminish) I should not be surprized if other persons, equally

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zealous

zealous for the church, should propose the prohibition of our preaching and publishing; and perhaps some still more zealous may propose in earnest that *short way with the Dissenters*, which Defoe did in irony, as a proper sacrifice to the safety of church and state.

But other statesmen, not instructed by bishops, may make a juster estimate of the services which the *church* of England has actually rendered to the *state*, and examine the principles of the *alliance* that has subsisted between them; and they may then perhaps not think it worth the while to secure it at so great an expence. Considering the progress of knowledge in general, and of good sense in matters of religion in particular, they may think it prudent first to reform the abuses in the church; and in time they may find that it will be the wish of the country, and necessary for the peace of it, to abandon the ecclesiastical establishment altogether.

Thus,

Thus, Sir, you are in possession of the free sentiments of a citizen of this free country \*, those of a man who has no interest but in the reputation and flourishing state of it, who has honestly endeavoured to do every thing in his power to add to its reputation, without seeking its emoluments; who wants nothing that you, Sir, as the prime minister of his country, can give him; and who has done nothing for which he apprehends he has any thing to fear. Let what he has freely proposed, be impartially considered.

I am one of that body of Dissenters who have always thought themselves happy to find any opportunity of shewing their approbation of the measures of their sovereign, and particularly of that in consequence of which you, Sir, were appointed to your

\* It is hardly necessary to inform my readers, that this letter was written without the concurrence of the body of Dissenters, or of the Committee who conducted the late application to Parliament. They are not answerable for my mistakes, or for my imprudence.

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present



present situation; and though the experience of ages has taught us that there is little ground of dependance on the gratitude of *statesmen*, or of *courts*, we had some expectations from a *youth* uncorrupted by vice, and not hackneyed in the ways of the world, and we are still unwilling to think that we are wholly disappointed.

We understood that when you were first applied to on the business that was lately agitated, you did not appear to think unfavourably of it. The strong disapprobation which you expressed of the measure must, therefore, have arisen afterwards. But what you advanced on the subject has by no means satisfied us that it arose from mature consideration, or from any better views of the thing. We must, therefore, in a great measure, withdraw the confidence which we had placed in your liberality, or your discernment. But we are not without hopes that your mind may still be open to conviction, and that, on a future occasion, you will be the more zealous to

*on the Subject of the* TEST ACT. 51

do us justice, on account of your having been the principal means of denying it to us at present. At the most, we can but retire to the situation we have so long occupied, and to which we have been so much accustomed, as to be pretty well reconciled to it, which is that of deserving favours which we have not obtained, and of being frowned upon, and discountenanced, by a government, to which we have ever shown the most zealous attachment; at the same time that it takes into its bosom that part of the community which was ever noted for its disloyalty. But we consider our condition not as that of *humiliation*, but of *pride*; and we may some time perhaps have an opportunity of shewing our magnanimity, by *overcoming evil with good*.

The aid of the Dissenters has more than once been wanted to secure the civil liberties of this country, and even to befriend the ecclesiastical establishment of it, and it may be wanted again. Our ancestors were principally instrumental both in the

restoration of the Stuarts, and in the settlement of the crown on the present reigning family; and future princes may look for assistance where their predecessors have never failed to find it.

Neither our numbers, our property, or our dispositions, are such as to give you any thing to fear from our resentment, if we should retain any. But though we are few, we trust that we are respected by the sounder and the more liberal part of the community; and therefore that such public measures as are known to be adopted by us, will be generally esteemed to be those which are favourable to public liberty, and have the concurrence of the friends of it, whether they rank with us as Dissenters from the establishment, or not. In this respect Mr. Fox did us ample justice; but we hope no more than justice.

Permit us, Sir, to think thus favourably of ourselves, as a source of consolation



tion under our present defeat, and as an encouragement to resume our application for the redress of our grievances on a future occasion; when, I doubt not, it will be understood that our cause is that of *justice*, and of reasonable *liberty*, and that it will have the hearty support of all those who wish to be considered as the true friends of liberty, in the House of Commons, and out of it.

I cannot conclude this address without observing, that from you, Sir, we were led to expect a reform in the state of representation in this country, and other measures of public utility; and sorry I am to say that it yet remains to be seen whether you are a real friend to such measures, and chuse to have your name enrolled among the very few truly honest and upright statesmen, or will be content to have it lost in the great mass of those who have had no views but to their own interest or ambition, who have lived in the practice of all the arts of deceit, and who,  
begin-

54 *A Letter to Mr. PITT, &c.*

beginning with imposing upon their country, have at length never failed to involve themselves in that ignominy and disgrace, which they have been the means of bringing upon others.

I am,

S I R,

Your very humble servant,

J. PRIESTLEY.

LONDON,  
MARCH 31, 1787.



F I N I S.

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N.B. Those who may wish to have farther Information concerning the Dissenters than they will find in this Letter, I would refer to a Pamphlet I published some Time ago, intitled, A VIEW of the PRINCIPLES and CONDUCT of the PROTESTANT DISSENTERS, with Respect to the Civil and Ecclesiastical Constitution of England, 2d Edition, 1s. 6d.—On the Subject of ECCLESIASTICAL ESTABLISHMENT, and the Principles of CIVIL and RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, I would refer my Readers to my ESSAY ON GOVERNMENT.

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